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Aceijas, Carmen ORCID logoORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3652-6536>, Waldhäusl, Sabrina, Lambert, Nicky ORCID logoORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8785-4719>, Cassar, Simon and Bello-Corassa, Rafael (2016) Health related lifestyles among university students. Having the time of their lives? European Journal of Public Health, Volume 26, Issue suppl_1. In: 9th EPH conference 2016. All for Health, Health for All, 09-12 Nov 2016, Vienna, Austria. . ISSN 1101-1262 [Conference or Workshop Item] (doi:10.1093/eurpub/ckw166.011)

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HEALTH RELATED LIFESTYLES AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS. HAVING THE TIME OF THEIR LIVES?

Aceijas C^a, Waldhäusl S^b, Lambert N^c, Cassar S^d, Bello-Corassa R^e,

^a Corresponding author. Middlesex University. The Burroughs Hendon. Town Hall extension building. London, NW4 4BT. UK. Email address: c.aceijas@mdx.ac.uk

^b Middlesex University. The Burroughs Hendon. Town Hall extension building. London, NW4 4BT. UK. Email address: SW1123@live.mdx.ac.uk@mdx.ac.uk

^c Middlesex University. The Burroughs Hendon. Town Hall extension building. London, NW4 4BT. UK. Email address: s.cassar@mdx.ac.uk

^d Middlesex University. The Burroughs Hendon. Town Hall extension building. London, NW4 4BT. UK. Email address: n.lambert@mdx.ac.uk

^e Universidade Federal dos Vales do Jequitinhonha e Mucuri. Campus JK, Rodovia MGT 367, KM 583, nº 5000, Alto da Jacuba 39100-000 Alto da Jacuba. Brazil. Email address: rafael.bellocorassa@gmail.com

Background: Two thirds of the global mortality is caused by NCDs. Studies suggest that transition to university life poses a high risk for adoption of unhealthy routines. This study aimed at strengthening the evidence on health related lifestyles (physical activity, nutrition, smoking, drugs and alcohol use) and mental health among UK UG students.

Methods: Mixed methods study comprising a cross-sectional online survey, two focus groups, and three in-depth interviews. The surveyed population was UG students of Middlesex University London. A proportionate to School's size stratified random sampling strategy was used (n=359). Two focus groups were conducted to investigate students' perceptions and three in-depth interviews with university stakeholders.

Results: 60% of respondents were insufficiently physically active, 47% had an unbalanced diet and 30% low mental wellbeing. Statistically significant risk factors for suboptimal physical activity: Been a woman (OR =2.3; 95%CI =1.4–3.9), not use of university gym (OR =2.8; 95%CI =1.2–6.2), and smoking (OR =2.1; 95%CI =1.0–4.3). For unbalanced diet: low mental wellbeing (OR =1.7; 95%CI =1.1– 2.7), drug use (OR =0.4; 95%CI =0.1–0.9) and school of study (Science & Technology: OR =3.5; 95%CI =1.5–8.2. Business: OR =2.8; 95%CI =1.1–6.9). For mental wellbeing: unbalanced diet (OR =1.7; 95%CI =1.0–2.7), not feeling like shopping for/and cooking (OR =2.3; 95%CI =1.1–4.8), and a lack of help-seeking behaviour in case of distress (OR =3.7; 95%CI =2.0–6.9). Qualitative analysis revealed seven thematic categories: transition to new life, university environment and systems, finances, academic pressure and health promotion in campus and recommendations.

Conclusions: The prevalence of unhealthy behaviours among university students is high, and unlikely to change over time. Determinants for these behaviours are varied and can be interrelated. Universities need to include the protection and promotion of health in their core values.

Main message:

University students' health related lifestyles are likely to compromise their future health. Universities should incorporate the promotion of students' health in their core values and strategies.